

# “Thondaman is a threat to my life”: Digambaran

*“Arumugam Thondaman objected to the former President offering me a ministerial portfolio. Now that we are in power, I will not allow him becoming a cabinet minister in our Government,” declared Minister of Upcountry New Housing Infrastructure and Community Development Palani Digambaran. “I will never get together with Thondaman. He is a threat to my life. If he gets power he will take revenge from us. That is not a secret. However, I don’t want to work with lunatics,” the Minister said, in an interview with the Daily FT. Diganbaran is the leader of the National Union of Workers (NUW) and also a member of the Tamil Progressive Alliance. Following are excerpts:*

**Q: Why did you threaten to leave the Government if Arumugam Thondaman is offered a ministerial portfolio?**

**A:** I feel this incident was blown out of proportion by the media. I never threatened to leave the Government. The media has misinterpreted what I meant. Let me explain what actually happened. The media wanted my comments on the rumour Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) is to join the Government and that Arumugam Thondaman will get a ministerial post. I answered them saying ‘if Thondaman joins Government, I will leave’. But all I wanted to say was if Thondaman is offered a ministerial port-

folio we will object that move. Now everyone is under the impression I am leaving the Government. However, I don’t think we should discuss this matter any further because Thondaman will not join the Government.

**Q: Why do you say that? Were you given any assurance by the Government?**

**A:** I was not given any assurance by anybody. The truth is Thondaman will not be joining the Government. He will not be offered a ministerial portfolio. This was only speculation. The Government has no intention of taking CWC or Thondaman. It was only a false rumour given unnecessary publicity by the media.

**Q: The media reported that along with you six more will leave the Government. Can you name them?**

**A:** I just told you that Arumugam Thondaman will not join this Government. Therefore I will not leave. So there is no point naming those people.

**Q: Are you worried that if Thondaman joins the Government, people will support him and you will lose popularity?**

**A:** People chose me and elected me with higher votes when Thondaman was in power. Do you think people are stupid to support a politically bankrupt person like him?

**Q: Who is more popular among the estate workers, you or Arumugam Thondaman?**

**A:** Who says he is popular? I am the one who secured over 100,000 votes during the last election. He got only 60,000 votes. So who is more popular? Why would people like Thondaman? What has he done for the upcountry? What has he done for estate workers? If he was popular, why did people sent him

home? Why did people elect Diganbaran, Radhakrishnan and Mano Ganesan with massive votes?

For the first time people decided not to elect Thondaman. Now isn’t that an achievement? Estate workers are no fools. They have realised Thondaman will never do anything for their wellbeing. People have faith in us because in just less than one year we have done a lot that Thondaman failed to do over the last so many years. There is no question about popularity.

**Q: You have worked with Thondaman during the Mahinda Rajapaksa administration. Why is this sudden displeasure?**

**A:** During the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime, I was promised a ministerial portfolio. But Arumugam Thondaman objected to that. He didn’t allow Mahinda Rajapaksa to offer me a ministry. However, in the latter stages Rajapaksa gave ministerial posts to me and

Radhakrishnan. But Thondaman continued to protest; he was unhappy about our appointments.

Now this is our Government, why should we offer him a ministerial post? If he objected to our appointments when he was in power, we should not give him a ministerial post in our cabinet. We should not forget the fact that he was rejected by the people. What would people think? They will lose the trust they have in us if we allow such things. People wanted to teach him a lesson. They gave us an opportunity to be in power and raise a voice for them. We should not break that trust people have in us.

**Q: Why did Thondaman object to Mahinda Rajapaksa offering you a ministerial portfolio? What was the reason?**

## FT Political Pulse



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Minister of Upcountry New Housing Infrastructure and Community Development  
**Palani Digambaran**

**A:** During that time Thondaman had power. He had three or four Parliamentarians on his side and we had only two; it was just me and Radhakrishnan. But today we have more power. We have six with us whereas Thondaman has only two. He doesn’t have much to say at the moment. I honestly don’t see any sensible reason for the Government to offer him a ministerial portfolio.

**Q: You have been in power for nearly one year. What have you done to uplift the lives of upcountry Tamils?**

**A:** We have identified three areas that need to be looked into in order to uplift the lives of estate workers. The three areas are education, housing and more job opportunities. We will give estate workers seven perches to build a house and the Government will build the

houses too. Now imagine getting land and a house to call their own; for the last 200 years these people have lived in line rooms. What we are trying to do will be a remarkable milestone. Apart from this, during the next four years we have planned to build 50,000 housing units. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has assured his fullest support in this regard. It is still at the discussion level, but we will commence this project very soon.

If we take education, Minister Radhakrishnan has taken initiatives to build a school in Hatton with all the facilities. It is called Royal College. We believe this will be a good opportunity for students. This school will have all the facilities a so-called leading school in Colombo has. Meanwhile, we are carrying out some important projects to develop Hatton town. There are some interesting projects that we are discussing at the moment. When all of these put into place I think we are doing a lot to keep the estate workers happy.

After many, many years the plantation workers’ salary issue finally reached a solution with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe taking personal responsibility to increase their allowance. Nobody can point a finger at us and say we haven’t done anything. Minister Radhakrishnan, Minister Mano Ganesan and I will make sure these projects are implemented fully. We will not let down the people in the upcountry.

**Q: Don’t you feel you can achieve more for the upcountry by working together with Ceylon Workers Congress?**

**A:** I have told this to media many times. I will never get together with Thondaman. He is a threat to my life. If he gets power, he will take revenge from us. That is not a secret. However, I don’t want to work with lunatics. I can’t work with such insane people.

**Q: What are the remarks of upcountry Tamils about the present Government?**

**A:** When you cultivate, it takes some time to harvest. This is a simple theory. What can this Government do in just 12 months? It needs time. Mahinda Rajapaksa and his henchmen stole billions and billions of people’s money. As a result the country is suffering today. The country is debt ridden. We have explained this to the people. The Prime Minister is taking all possible measures to overcome this unfortunate situation and put the country back on track politically and economically. We can’t expect miracles from this Government. People should give them more time. I personally feel if we allow Prime Minister Wickremesinghe to carry out his proposals, the country’s economy will soon recover.

# National Govt.: Does it require more time to achieve its utility?

## Theory of a coups d’état

IN the wee hours of 9 January 2015, an interesting incident was reported in mass media. It was the sighting of the former Chief Justice Mohan Peiris at the palace giving possibly legal advice or perhaps advice on the available legal remedies or loopholes in the system to circumvent the will of the people. The Attorney General too had been summoned to the palace for possible efforts at rendering the results of the presidential election annulled on the pretext of an orchestrated national emergency.

The conspiracy theory was advanced by the Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera by officially lodging an entry with the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). The key participants who were at the palace were also interrogated and statements taken. This theory of a secret conspiracy was also echoed by the Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the key ministers. The story had even been picked up by the mainstream international newspapers such as Daily Mail of London and The Hindu of India.

So far the investigation seems to have got firmly anchored at the Attorney General’s Department. The entire legal fraternity was of the opinion that former CJ Mohan Peiris’s presence was an assault on the independence of Judiciary and his physical presence had no bearing whatsoever over any legal issue that might have arisen there.

Pressure had to be mounted to get Mohan Peiris to resign. There were reports that Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapaksa had

## Guest Column



By **Srinath Fernando**

behind-the-door negotiations to get his resignation but in the end his appointment was rendered null and void. The independence of the Judiciary has now been restored, it can be gauged by making comparative analysis of the style and governance of the previous regime. What therefore needs to be done on the conspiracy theory is now a policy matter for the Government.

## National Government

Since President Sirisena came to power through collaborative efforts of anti-SLFP/UPFA political factions, civil society organisations and trade unions led by UNP who were hell-bent on seeing a change of regime owing to an acute public demand that there must be a change. People’s frustration was bolstered by the widespread allegations of corruptions, absence of rule of law, public display of vulgarity, and authoritarian tendencies of the previous regime.

The National Government was institutionalised through the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, the passage of which was approved by a historical majority of 214 members voting in favour of it. The national government concept had been enshrined in the 19th Amendment. It is ironical that

we have a Joint Opposition (JO) crying foul over their own Government for which they voted. They failed to recognise the National Government largely due to petty politics. There are about 51 Members of Parliament who are opposed to the national government concept and out of this 51 a majority of MPs voted for the 19th Amendment.

There is an incongruity as to the real purpose behind the creation of a JO as their purpose is to protect the interests of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. It is even beyond comprehension as to why former President Rajapaksa and his son MP Namal Rajapaksa were absent at the time No Confidence Motion against the Minister of Finance was being debated in Parliament. They had not even signed the Motion, according to press reports.

The No Confidence Motion against the Minister of Finance was an attempt at dividing the SLFP and not really against the Minister and it clearly showed that the National Government is as strong as it ever was. The strength of the National Government is manifested through the excellent cohabitation between the leaders of SLFP and UNP.

The need for a national government was borne out of the fact that we have had a brutal war for three decades witnessing the human carnage of killing each other. The conflict was rooted in the ethnic conflict that bedevilled our country in terms of human destruction, economic destruction and degradation of the harmony among ethnic minorities. A political solution to our national issue has been dragged on for almost four decades now. Political pragmatism was displayed by President

Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe to forge ahead and work for common good of the nation.

The important task right at the moment is to overcome the economic woes of the country. It is the responsibility of all and sundry to be patient as the country is going through this difficult economic circumstance owing to our own mismanagement of the economy through excessive borrowing and capital investments which did not provide any income to service the interest payment of the loan let alone the capital payment. The Mattala Airport and Hambantota Port have not produced the desired income and thus become a burden to the national purse.

Even Wimal Weerawansa, while being a Minister of the then Government, was castigating P.B. Jayasundera over loans being taken to finance the road constructions (on Derana TV 360 program). He was indirectly attacking former President Rajapaksa.

It is fortunate that leaders at the helm of National Government have performed remarkably well over policy decisions and there has not been any public display of acrimony. This must prevail until the country is back on track. The leaders of National Government have displayed real statesmanship and must be commended that they have put the country first, not the personal agendas of fattening the bellies of their families.

## New constitution

The most important milestone that can be achieved through a national government is the introduction of a new constitution that would bring all communities together as one country and one nation, leaving no room for

separatist tendencies. There are ample lessons we can learn from experiences with other countries.

The US Constitution held for over 225 years with few amendments. The Constitution of India held for almost 60 years with some amendments. It is a remarkable document that held various ethnic communities together. The Constitution must uphold the dignity of individual and it must provide a sense of pride to its citizens that they are second to none and that each citizen receives the equal protection of the law.

The constitution must provide an equally powerful judiciary with ability to dispense justice without any fear or favour. The new constitution must provide a bicameral legislature with a higher chamber for the learned members of the society, religious dignitaries and professionals who have excelled in their respective professions so that political partisanship or legislation rushed through the heat of the moment can be checked when the bill comes before the upper chamber.

It might have been a colossal political mistake to have disbanded the Senate of Ceylon in 1971 solely due to a partisan political exercise. The obvious reasons for the abolition were that the Senate was dominated by the UNP loyalists and Senators who were appointed during British administration, who might thwart the legislative agendas of the then SLFP-led Government.

The Senate of Ceylon has been in existence for 24 years and it was preposterous as to how the Royal Assent was taken to certify the Ceylon (Constitution and Independence) Amendment Act No. 36 of 1971. The new constitution must therefore be a people’s constitution so that it will remain in force for centuries to come.

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# Right to Information after two decades of struggle

AFTER almost 20 years of unprecedented attempts, people in Sri Lanka will savour their right for information once Parliament approves the Right to Information (RTI) bill over the next two days which will empower the citizens to promote transparency and accountability in the country.

RTI will make citizen informed and is better equipped to keep necessary vigil on the instruments of governance and make the Government more accountable to the governed.

As a keen and prominent advocate for Right to Information (RTI) laws in the country, Transparency International Sri Lanka along with Citizens for Right to Information is grateful to the Government of Sri Lanka for making full commitment to enact the much-awaited RTI bill in Sri Lanka.

Enacting Right to Information legislations in Sri Lanka was first mooted in 1996 through the R.K.W. Guneskara Commission and TISL is glad that after almost 20 years legislation for RTI will be in place soon. Throughout this period Parliamentarians, previous governments, professional and civil society activists struggle hard to established RTI laws in the country. The first Right to Information legislation in the world was passed in 1766 when Sweden passed her Freedom of the Press Act.

The RTI Act will force any public authority to make sure that the citizens are enlightened about relevant procedures or decisions that could affect them. Hence it guarantees citizens access to information from all public authorities unless its information that can be damaging towards the security of the country. Right to Information laws and policies create mechanisms whereby an individual can access information that may have an impact on them, in order to meaningfully exercise other rights.

Right to Information (RTI) laws and policies encourage governments to adopt a “right-to-know” approach, in the interests of both the holder of the information and the citizen, where as much information as possible is automatically published.

Citizens for Right to Information wishes to state that the Government must be credited for consulting civil society and improving the bill and for referring it to all the provincial councils. However, Citizens for Right to Information requests the Government not to water down the bill at the second and third reading in Parliament and expect at the very least for Government to pass it in its current form as this right is recognised in the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.